

## BOOK REVIEWS

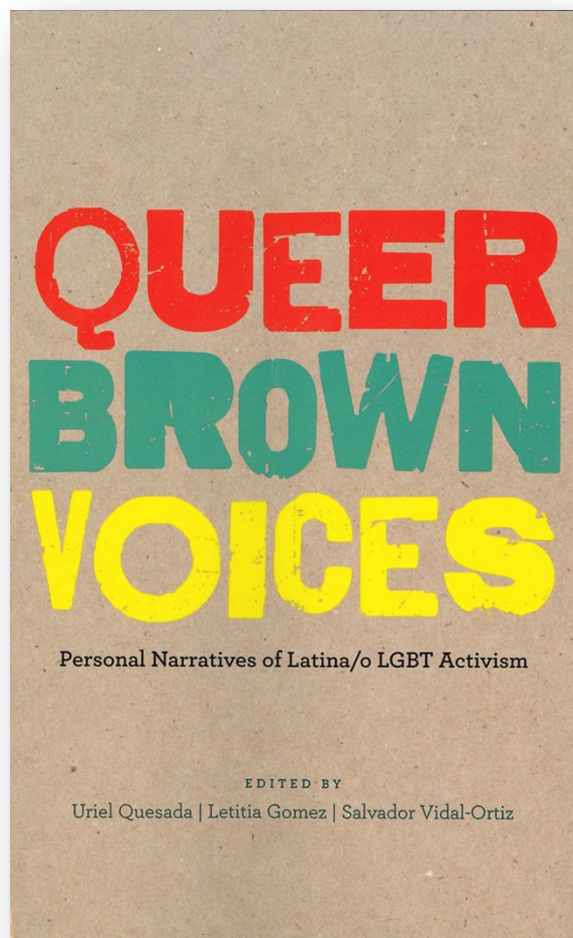
Uriel Quesada, Letitia Gomez, and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (Editors)

*Queer Brown Voices*

Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 2015. ISBN: 978-1477307304.

Reviewed by: Yancy Mejia, *Humboldt State University*

Before the Stonewall Riots in New York City, the Queer community was extensively marginalized and oppressed in mainstream society, had no political traction, and lacked social validation. The community suffered from discriminatory laws, social inequality, a heteronormative and homophobic culture, constant police harassment and/or brutality, and hate crimes. Thus, the urgency to voice its members' human and civil rights took the forefront of the Gay Liberation movement of the 1970's. However, while this movement came out of the counter-cultures of the 1960's, and was based on the liberation of the Queer community in the United States, it still upheld the ideologies of the status quo, which were mostly dominated by Eurocentrism and sexism. Ultimately, these internalized practices displaced the presence of Queer Latin American Narratives in the larger context of the "Grand Narratives" in the Queer community. *Queer Brown Voices: Personal Narratives of Latina/o LGBT Activism* breaks new ground and deserves to be included as a part of American Queer history to provide the platform and recognition of the Queer Brown voices that have contributed to this civil rights movement. This book eloquently challenges the dominant discourse of a colonized history through autobiographical stories and personal narratives of progressive mobilization and activism against racism, homophobia, sexism, sexuality, and identity. Most importantly, it paves the way for giving an already marginalized community the platform to declare a counter perspective on Queer liberation history that is permeated with power struggle, classism, and the suppression of cultural diversity. This important work



decolonizes a history that otherwise portrays itself as a "progressive" movement failing to incorporate diversity through the intersectionalities of culture, gender, and identity of the LGBT Latino community.

The showcased personal narratives revealed a history of activism beginning in the 1970's that continued well into the 1990's in the United States and Puerto Rico. They shared a personal evolution of reclaiming suppressed identities, family hardships, struggle for college education, discrimination in public spaces, catalyst for

activism, professionalization of organizations, and classism faced while being members of Queer organizations. As "whiteness" and male dominance monopolized the forefront of the Queer Movement, the necessity to establish community organizations that represented the multiple identities of Queer Brown activists became evident as an intrinsic progression of socio-political mobilization. The creation of Austin Latina/o Lesbian and Gay Organization (ALLGO) in 1985 and the National Latina/o Lesbian and Gay Organization (LLEGO) in 1987 allowed Queer Brown organizations to gain national visibility. This helped them receive federal funding for their social justice and human rights advocacy projects as they transformed into nonprofit organizations. The book highlighted the fact that Queer Latin@s, as an already marginalized population, also faced discrimination within their Latin culture. They were viewed as the "minority among the minorities," seeming to be excluded from gay rights issues, as they were constantly trying to build a bridge among the Latin@ community and the LGBT community. This dilemma only augmented to the struggle these organizations faced in the Eurocentric nonprofit sector, constantly fighting to legitimize themselves as an extension of the mainstream Queer Liberation Movement. Thus, it was crucial for each organization to foster networks with other Latin@ LGBT organizations, sustain shared cultural heritage, and, at the same time, provide mentoring to others to successfully engage in socio-political mobilization.

This oral history book also exemplified personal struggles that resonated into public issues experienced by each Queer Latin@ activist. Every narrative became a description of the activist's personal evolution of identity within a mainstream culture that discounted his/her experiences. Most of the activists came from low-income backgrounds where their families were migrant workers, spoke little English, and, thus were deemed "uneducated." Regardless of their disadvantaged backgrounds,

many pursued college education where they became exposed to Chicano consciousness, feminism, and, at the same time, faced racism. For some, identifying as "Latin@" was a sobering realization because they were being discriminated in public spaces as seen in the experiences of Jesus Chairez and Laura Esquivel. Others realized the vital role their Latin roots played in their personal identities as they traveled to Mexico to learn about their heritage, (see narratives of Letitia Gomez, Mona Noriega, and Jesus Chairez). On top of staying true to their Latin@ roots within a Eurocentric society, their identities intersected with other social roles that led them to be publicly questioned. For example, Mona Noriega was a single mother who recognized the importance of creating safe spaces for other Queer Latina mothers to convene and foster healthy families. This book also included the voice of Adela Vasquez, a Trans woman of Cuban descent, who fought to raise awareness of what it meant to be a trans-Latina in an oppressive homophobic and heteronormative society. She also contributed to expanding the Latin@ identity to include Afro-Latin@ identity to its diverse culture. However, Vasquez was the only trans narrative in this book. All these Queer Brown voices paved the way for Queer Latin@s to view themselves as *social activists* by participating in "intersectional activism" that respects diversity through its intersectionalities of race/ethnicity, class, culture, gender, and sexuality.

Being Queer and Brown rendered the contributors of this book susceptible to various systems of oppression, where public spaces did not offer safe places to congregate. The bar scene was the only space they felt they could express themselves without inhibitions. However, they were still discriminated and denied entry because they were Queer and Brown. These experiences motivated them to reclaim public spaces for themselves and their movement. Most of them kept their sexual identity a secret, influencing them to sometimes

lead double lives, before coming out to their family and friends. Furthermore, establishing coalitions and socio-political groups enabled them to fight for their human and civil rights as it was crucial for them to have a presence in the local, state, and national level. The professionalization of Queer Brown organizations as legitimate nonprofits also posed challenges as they struggled to obtain federal funding, encountered clashes with White gay men in LGBT organizations, and faced active sexist resistance when females gained leadership positions. Moreover, the community as a whole became vulnerable to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's as many members lost friends and colleagues from their organizations. Moises Agosto-Rosario and Jose Gutierrez experienced it first-hand as they were HIV positive, making this period in Queer history a precarious turning point. During this time, the impetus for Queer Brown activism, such as anti-war resistance, opposition to United States occupations in Latin America, support for migrant workers, and support for Latin@ human rights, was shifted to confront the effects of AIDS. Nevertheless, Queer Brown organizations relied upon creative modes of activism and dissemination of awareness through *bailes* (dances) as fundraisers that played Spanish music, *platicas* (discussions) in safe spaces, film screenings, festivals, protests, marches, newsletters, and workshops. This was all done in order to organize and shape their communities' consciousness to bring awareness of the need to fight for their human and civil rights in a larger scale.

The Queer Liberation Movement of the 1970's magnified the visibility of the struggle for LGBT community in contemporary American culture. Unfortunately, mainstream Queer history did not include the struggles and accomplishments of Queer Brown activists which includes their invaluable contribution to this history. The editors of this oral history book recognized that and, in turn, provided a platform for these activists to share their unique

struggles, transformations, and accomplishments. As such, the editors engaged in a subversive form of academic expression by compiling these personal narratives of Queer Brown activists who worked in the front lines of the movement. This book was a thoughtful approach to decolonize another aspect of Latin@ history, which has been wrought with invalidation from dominant discourses that capitalize on what they deem to be considered "legitimate" history. The featured Queer Brown activists articulated a struggle of acceptance and validation in the face of social spaces that have attempted to suppress their visibility in local, state, and national communities. They forged networks to preserve their dignity and cultural roots while mobilizing, educating, and raising the consciousness of their Queer Latin@ communities. Ultimately, this book reclaimed Queer Brown voices, from a Queer Liberation history, that otherwise portrays itself as a "progressive" movement which has largely failed to incorporate diversity of intersectionalities of culture, gender, sexuality, and, most importantly, the identities of the LGBT Latin@ community.

---

*Yancy Mejia is a co-managing editor for HJSR's special issue "Sexuality in the Post-Marriage Equality." She is currently a graduate student in the Public Sociology MA program at Humboldt State University. As an undergraduate at Cal State LA, she studied gender and sexuality within the context of the swinger's subculture.*